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The Age Factor in Linguistic Variation: A Reference to the Use of Kiswahili at Busia Border Town in East Africa

Patrick Lugwiri Okombo

Introduction

1 In this paper, I analyze age as one of the salient factors that motivate variation in the use of Kiswahili among ordinary citizens in East Africa. In my analysis and discussion, I use the various theoretical assumptions advanced by the variationist sociolinguists (e.g. Chambers 1995; Eckert 1977; Holmes 2003; Labov 1966; 1972; Peccei 1999; and Trudgill 1974) concerning the age pattern to understand how Kiswahili is socially construed and constructed by ordinary citizens. The data that I analyze are part of my doctoral research about the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice in East Africa.

2 My interest in the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice among the ordinary citizens in East Africa was to a large extent motivated by the ongoing efforts by the East African Community through the East African Kiswahili Commission to promote Kiswahili for use as "a tool for social integration among the ordinary citizens" in the Community. The study argued that even in the face of these language promotion efforts, little is known about how Kiswahili is understood and how it functions in real life situations and social contexts in socially multilingual environments where the ordinary citizens engage in their day-to-day social activities. This is in spite of popular views among researchers interested in the intersection between language and society that to understand the role of language in people's lives, linguists need to go beyond the study of grammar and policy and venture into the word of social action where words are embedded in and constitutive of specific social and cultural activities (Duranti, 1997). On the same view, Holmes (2013: 1) has observed that "examining the way people use

language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community, and the way people convey and construct aspects of their social identity through their language." In light of the foregoing, the study further argued that lack of insufficient studies on Kiswahili as a lived practice in East Africa is brought about by the tendency of previous linguistic studies to report on the use of Kiswahili in East Africa by simply basing on the language policies of the respective countries. This situation seems not unique to Kiswahili, but many of the African languages whose research and scholarship, as Kabugo (2013) has argued, has mainly centered on the grammatical descriptions of the languages, meaning that little work has been done on the interpersonal and group use of the languages.

3 The study revolves around four objectives namely: (1) to establish the patterns of the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens, (2) to explore the extent of the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens, (3) to ascertain the forms of the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens, and (4) to ascertain the perceptions and attitudes that the ordinary citizens in East Africa have towards Kiswahili. In my judgement, the content covered by these objectives and the corresponding questions are capable of providing a detailed and holistic analysis of the sociolinguistics of any language, including Kiswahili.

4 The study was conducted at two sites: Namanga and Busia border towns. I selected the two town on two accounts; first, by the virtue of them being urban centres, and therefore, suitable sites where social multilingualism is highest due to increased citizen mobility (Blommaert 2010). Secondly, the towns are located at border points serving as exit and entry points into neighbouring countries. Because of this, I anticipated meeting ordinary citizens of different nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, and their response to Kiswahili is what I was interested in. In this paper, I only make use of the data collected at Busia; the Namanga data on the same subject will be considered in a separate paper.

5 Busia town lies on the border between Kenya and Uganda. In particular, the town is found in Busia District of Uganda and Busia County of Kenya. It is by road approximately 195 km from Kampala city and about 450 km from Nairobi city. Apart from being an exit and entry point into and out of Kenya and Uganda, Busia town prides itself as a business hub in the region. The Busia customs office is classified as the busiest in the East African Community. The town is cosmopolitan and always full of activity, bringing together not only East Africans from the two neighboring countries of Uganda and Kenya, but also citizens from across Africa and other parts of the world. My research revealed that in their coming, the citizens are driven by various motives such as trade, travel, adventure, entertainment, education, employment, worship, residence, research, among others. In my study of the use of Kiswahili in the town, I targeted four domains from the foregoing list; namely: trade, travel, entertainment, and worship. As I elaborate in a separate section below, I considered the four activities to be more apposite for engaging with the ordinary citizens.

6 As a departure from the theoretical studies I mentioned earlier, this study adopted ethnography as a design as elaborated by Duranti (1997), and this was motivated by the arguments presented by the Citizen Sociolinguistics model,[1] as well as the various approaches concerned with language in social interactions, that, because such language presents challenges of unpredictability, an ethnographic "approach" to the study of

language-use in the day-to-day social activities provides a sure way of getting to the bottom of the finest aspects of language-use. In particular, I collected the data through observation (both participant and non-participant), interviews and focus group discussions. In addition to the random observations in the markets, religious gatherings, bus parks and football halls, I randomly selected participants for interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 16 interviews and three focus group discussions each with eight participants were conducted. The age of the interviewees ranged between 20 and 70 years.[2] I present the findings in the analysis section accompanied with the relevant extract(s) from the data transcripts.

7 The structure of the paper is that this introduction is followed by a brief literature review section which essentially provides theoretical generalizations of the age factor in linguistic variation. The section highlights some of the social motivations for linguistic variation such as ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, class, kinship, leisure activities, and age, and shows that apart from gender, the age of the speaker is considered a key variable. The second section of the paper considers a brief ethnographic description of Busia town as the context of the research. Busia is endowed with numerous markets and shops, both big and small, and both on the Ugandan and Kenyan side of the border. These are complimented with a robust public transport network that comprised crossborder and within-border buses, taxis, and *bodaboda*, as well as numerous entertainment halls that provide spaces for football fans to watch football games. Numerous religious places of worship such as churches and mosques are located at Busia town, making it "a religious town." Social activities at Busia are therefore vibrant, and within this vibrancy, divergent linguistic resources come to the show.

8 The third section presents the findings by grouping them into three: linguistic practices of the youth (20-35 years), linguistic practices of the adults (36-59 years), and linguistic practices of the elderly (above 60 years). While the youth are shown to gravitate towards slang-like forms of Kiswahili, the adults are seen to use more standard and formal forms of Kiswahili, in addition to engaging in extensive code-mixing between Kiswahili and English. To shade more light on these linguistic behaviors, the fourth section discuss the meanings that are derived from the analysis. It shows that the linguistic practices of the different age groups in relation to Kiswahili are motivated by factors such as identity construction, signals of group membership, expression of linguistic power, and perceptions and attitudes towards the various forms of Kiswahili. Lastly, the paper offers a conclusion by opining that due to the linguistic variations associated with the age factor, Kiswahili is not necessarily a homogeneous entity, and this is attributed to the dynamic nature of language. The conclusion emphasizes the need for more empirical studies in Kiswahili as a lived practice in order to understand how other social motivations for the use of Kiswahili contribute to our knowledge about how Kiswahili is socially construed and constructed by various speakers.

Understanding Linguistic Variation and the Age Factor

9 Language variation in social interactions has been recognized as a key concept and object of study in variationist sociolinguistics. Underscoring the centrality of variationist studies in linguistics, Wardhaugh states that "no one speaks the same way

all the time and people constantly exploit the nuances of the language they speak for a wide variety of purposes" (2006: 5). Speakers may vary their use of language at all the levels of linguistic analysis. At the phonetic level, the variation is in the pronunciation (accent) while at the lexical level the variation is on the choice of the word. At the grammatical level, speakers may vary a word form (morphological) or a sentence structure (syntactical).

10 Variationist sociolinguists acknowledge that speakers also make language choices that transcend a single language, shifting from one language to another in their day-to-day social interactions. While sociolinguistic researchers in general associate the changes in the use of language to factors that are both geographical and social, those concerned specifically with the use of language in social interactions focus on social "motivations", to borrow Labov's (1963) terminology. Some of these social "motivations", or factors, include race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, social class, kinship, leisure activities, and age. According to Peccei (1999: 71), language variability along these factors "allows us as speakers to locate ourselves in a multi-dimensional society and as hearers to locate others in that society as well."

11 Of the above motivations, Wardhaugh notes that it has been fairly easier to relate linguistic variation to gender and age than to some other factors such as ethnicity and race which are "much more subjective in nature and less easily quantifiable" (2006: 148). As a result, the age factor has been sufficiently dealt with by many sociolinguists such as Chambers (1995), Eckert (1997), Holmes (2003), Labov (1966; 1972), Peccei (1999), and Trudgill (2000). Chambers particularly has argued that there are five physical indicators of age: childhood, adolescence, early/young adulthood, middle age, and old age (Abdullah, Safrudin, Taib, and Ismail, 2018). In general, Chambers and the other researchers that I have pointed out have recognized that young children, the adolescents, the youth, the adults, and the elderly speak differently.

12 In specific, the above-mentioned scholars have endeavored to demonstrate that while babies basically learn language as introduced to them by their immediate caregivers, their language is prone to change as they move up the age scale into the adolescence. Thus, adolescence is characterized by the use of linguistic resources that are distinct from those of babies, the young adults, the adults, as well as the older persons. As adolescents tend to distance themselves from the other members of the family/society, their language also begins to drift from what they have been taught previously; they vary their language in a way that is unique to them and their social groups and networks. Such a language is mostly characterized by the use of in-group slang and other non-standard forms that are considered stigmatized and less prestigious by the general society (Wardhaugh, 2006). As they transition into the youthful stage, the flexible nature of language also allows them to continue to vary their language. This situation reaches its peak at the youth (post-adolescent) stage. During this period, researchers have shown that speakers begging to skew their language towards a somehow "standardized" language that is descent and prestigious. This is due to the fact that the speakers are starting to realize that they are soon becoming adults and so need to behave according to the societal expectations.

13 Eckert (1997) argues that language of speakers become even more standard and stable as the youth transition into the adult stage. At this stage, speakers are under pressure to appear more "presentable" by conforming to societal norms and expectations of its members, including that of the use of "formal" and prestigious language. Eckert opines

that this stability is because the adults (middle-aged) are neither *learning* the language nor *losing* it, but rather, they are *using* it. However, this state of language again changes among the elderly who prefer the informal and less prestigious vernacular forms. According to Eckert, this group is no longer in the active work force in formal environments that demand the use of formal speech. Eckert's argument here suggests that most of these speakers retreat back to their family surroundings and other private spaces where such informal speech flourish and thereby dictate their use of such forms. On the other hand, Peccei (1999) argues that some people that old age inevitably results in the decline of communicative ability (especially in the formal codes). Peccei (1999: 89) summarizes the age-related variations in the use of language by arguing that while "there are other slightly less obvious linguistic differences between age groups as well, the age-related differences in vocabulary are often the ones most easily noticed by people"

14 As I mentioned in the introductory section, age emerged as a salient ground for variation in the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens in my PhD research on language as a lived practice in Busia town. Before presenting an analysis of my findings, I first give a brief description of the ethnographic context of Busia town.

Ethnographic Context of Busia Town

15 The Busia town is endowed with numerous markets on both sides of the border which attract many traders and buyers from diverse backgrounds. Examples of the big markets on the Kenyan side of the town are Soko Posta, Taxi Park Market, Busia Market, Kasarani Market, and Soko Matope. On the Ugandan side of the town, there are markets such as "Sokoni" (Market) and Kayola market. The markets specialize not only in farm produce but also construction materials and others. In addition, I observed that there exist big, medium and small shops, restaurants and entertainment joints along the road spreading into the interior areas of the town. Some of the shops stock general foods, others household consumables, while others specialize in non-consumables such as electronics, mobile phones, clothing and beddings. Other small-scale traders display their goods outside the shops and along the road in the town. Hawkers move around with their items, some carrying them on their heads and others on handcarts. All these activities make Busia a busy market point as I have pointed out.

16 Transport services in Busia town comprise of the vehicles that move from one point to the other within and around the town, and those that move from Busia town to other areas within the respective countries. The first category consists of buses that are crossing from Kenya to Uganda and vice versa, going as far as Kampala, Kigali, Nairobi, Mombasa and Dar es Salaam. Apart from these buses, there are hundreds of long-distance trucks that transport mostly oil and oil products from the port of Mombasa and other areas through Nairobi, Kisumu to other places in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Convergence of the citizens of diverse backgrounds at Busia is heightened by the fact that all passengers and crew on these buses and trucks have to make stop overs at this border point for clearance from the immigration department. Transportation of the ordinary citizens within and around Busia town is done by the *bodaboda* (a term used in this locality and several other places in East Africa to refer to persons who operate motorcycles and bicycles as a form of public transport).

These transportation services at Busia town also include those that operate from the town to other places within the respective countries.

17 Entertainment joints at Busia in the form of bars and clubs are many. From my observation, most of the popular and famous clubs and bars are located on the Ugandan side of the town and revelers are free to check in at any time, day or night. Nearly all these popular clubs are in the same location nearer the border line and close to the pervasive Sofia Market. Other than the big and popular clubs and bars, other medium and small bars are also packed in this region converting the place into what can be referred to as a "full time entertainment zone." The other parts of the town have clubs which also compete for customers with the rest of the clubs that I have elucidated. These clubs offer a major meeting space for football fans to watch their favorite teams play in various leagues. By around 3:00 P.M., the clubs are packed with football fans either watching match replays or waiting for the next match(es). This explains why the entertainment joints became one of the areas to undertake my study among the football fans.

18 Busia town has many worship centres in the form of churches and mosques. These are frequented by the ordinary citizens on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays as the main days of worship for the different groups. During the weekdays, the main activity in the churches is lunch hour fellowships which are also attended by a fair number of worshippers. At dawn, a number of churches can be heard conducting morning-hour prayers that the research participants refered to as "morning glory." Citizens cross from one side of the town to the other to participate in the religious activities offered by the churches.

19 From the foregoing account of the demographics of Busia, it is evident that the town is home to many kinds of people and diverse activities. The high mobility and convergence of people at Busia border town, mostly ordinary citizens and of diverse backgrounds and mother tongues brings about a kind of socially multilingual setting with diverse linguistic repertoires. Such an environment provides a perfect site for the study of the use of Kiswahili in the midst of other languages and language varieties. My interest in Kiswahili in this study is because it has been reported to be one of the most widely spoken languages of wider communication in East Africa (Habwe, 2009; Okombo & Muna 2017). Thus, in order to gain fast-hand knowledge about how the language is understood and used as a lived practice at Busia, I selected the ethnographic method as I describe in the section that follows.

Age-related Patterns and Forms Kiswahili at Busia

20 With respect to age, the data collected revealed significant variations in the patterns and forms of the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens at Busia border town in the selected public domains based on the three age-categories: the youth, the middle-aged, and the elderly. I will first descriptively present the linguistic practice of the youth, followed by the middle aged before turning to the practices of the elderly.

Linguistic Practices of the Youthful Citizens

21 The youth category comprised people aged 20–35. These are the people who mostly participated in focus group discussions that brought together football fans from both sides of the town. However, I also engaged a few of them in casual interviews.

22 While the majority of the youths whom I interacted with on the Kenyan side of the town acknowledged speaking Kiswahili most of the time in their day-to-day social activities while in public spaces at Busia, they however reported that the kind of Kiswahili they used amongst themselves vary in form considerably from that used by the middle aged and the elderly. Regarding the form of Kiswahili, these youthful participants noted that their Kiswahili, which they speak amongst themselves, consists of features such as uniquely coined vocabulary e.g. "*Beshte*" = Friend, common words whose meanings are altered e.g. "*Dunga*" (Pierce) = dress neatly, words in short forms e.g. "*Ka-*" = *Kama* (like/for example), among others. The youths reported that this is the form of Kiswahili popularly known as *Sheng*. Asked why they speak this kind of Kiswahili amongst themselves, the youths responded that "it is the language of the youths", "it is fashionable", and "it is the language of town." This was said to be the opposite of the "*Kiswahili cha kawaida*" (normal/regular Kiswahili) which they reported as "the language taught in school", "the language of the 'reserve' (country side)," and "an old fashion language." To illustrate this, I draw on the words of one of the participants in FGD1 who asserted:

> *... Pia wanataka kuonekana wamechanuka. So akiongea Kiswahili sanifu watu wataona yeye ni wa ushago...*
> ... They also want to be seen to be in the know. So if they speak standard Kiswahili they will think that he is a villager...

23 Asked about which language they speak amongst themselves and with their fellow youths when they cross to the Ugandan side of the town where a majority of them claimed to go for entertainment and to watch football, the youths reported that they maintain their form of Kiswahili (*Sheng*) amongst themselves because they move in groups of friends from the Kenyan side of the town. However, the youth claimed to switch to English, and sometimes Luganda when they encounter other youthful participants whom in their judgement are unable to speak Kiswahili. The female participants from the Kenyan side of the town claimed that the youthful females from the Ugandan side of the town turn to the "little-little Kiswahili" they are able to speak whenever they have to interact with their Kenyan male peers as a way of attracting them. The male Kenyan youths in reciprocation turn to speaking the "little Luganda" they know for similar reasons. Regarding this, another participant in FGD1 noted:

> *Kwanza hawa warembo wa Uganda wanapendanga sana kuongea Kiswahili hata kama ni kidogo kidogo wakipatana na machali wa Kenya. Yaani wanataka kuwafanya wafeel at home...*
> In fact, these Ugandan beauties like speaking Kiswahili very much even if it is a little little when they meet with the Kenyan males. They just want to make them feel at home...

24 Further, the Kenyan youthful participants reported that the Ugandan girls on the Ugandan side of Busia town consider Kenyan male youths in the same town to have more money, and that is why they (Ugandan female youths) choose to speak Kiswahili when interacting with the former group. A participant in FGD3 noted:

> *Wanasemanga pesa zetu ziko na mimba (kicheko). Sasa Msichana Mganda akisikia tu kwa club mnaongea Kiswahili anaona tu sasa hizo ni pesa...*
> They say that our money is pregnant (laughter). So when a Ugandan girl hears you speaking Kiswahili in a club she just understands that there is money...

25 The pregnancy metaphor used by the participant in the above extract reflects the economic power associated with those who speak Kiswahili in clubs on the Ugandan side of the border. In other words, it is an economic motivation for learning and speaking a language.

26 Linguistic practices of the youth at Busia were said to considerably change from the use of *Sheng* to the use of some "standard Kiswahili" when addressing the middle-aged and the elderly citizens. In such occasions, the youthful participants reported that they are "forced" to alter their language to a respectable form that they refered to as "*Kiswahili cha heshima*" (courteous Kiswahili). The youth went ahead to describe the "courteous Kiswahili" as one that is "common" and "plain", and close to the one they learned in school, though not as "strict." Asked why they have to change the form of the Kiswahili in such occasions, the youth responded that it is purely out of respect (*heshima*), and also, because some of the middle-aged addressees do not like the *Sheng* variety, while the elderly do not understand it completely. Supporting the views expressed by fellow participants as I report in this paragraph, another participant in the FGD1 observed:

> *Sheng si ya watu wakubwa... ni ya ma-youth tu... Sheng si hata lugha. Hata hawawezi kufundisha kwa mashule. Hata huwezi kuongea kwa ukoo...*
> Sheng is not for grown-ups... it is just for the youth... sheng is not even a language. They cannot even teach it in schools. One cannot even speak it with kinsmen...

27 The above view by one of the participants that *Sheng* as spoken by the youth is not a language yet they speak it is ironical given the fact that throughout the interviews and focus group discussions, they (youth) maintained the position that *Sheng* is the language for the youth, and painted it as more appealing for in-group communication than standard Kiswahili.

Linguistic Practices of the Middle-aged Citizens

28 In this group fall participants aged between 36–59 years. The majority of the participants in this age bracket participated in the interviews, but others were also observed at the markets, in entertainment joints, in the transport domain, and in selected religious gatherings.

29 The use of Kiswahili somehow stabilizes among the participants in this age bracket. My observations during the interviews was that unlike the youthful participants as I have described in the previous section, a majority of the middle-aged participants in my study made every effort to use some "standard Kiswahili." Although this category of participants engaged in code-mixing between Kiswahili and English, they were cautious enough not to overdo it. Moreover, their kind of code-mixing was not as that of the youth like "*ku*-watch" (to watch) and "*una*-feel" (you feel). Rather, the middle-age code-mixing was a free one like "*Yeye atakupa* direction" (He will direct you) and "*Kulingana na* research *yangu*" (according to my research).

30 When asked directly whether they speak Kiswahili, the middle-aged participants readily accepted that they do, and went ahead to claim that their Kiswahili is "good", and "not like that of the young people." However, this was the claim by participants on the Kenyan side of the town. Some of those on the Ugandan side of the town claimed

that they speak "a little-little Kiswahili" when they encounter participants who speak Kiswahili. This was particularly in the trade and transport domains. The religious and entertainment domains did not register the use of Kiswahili among participants from this age bracket mainly because many Ugandan participants from these domains reported not to cross to the Kenyan side of the town for these activities. Instead, many Kenyans reported crossing to the Ugandan side of the town for worship and entertainment where Kiswahili is not extensively used.

31 In the trade and transport domains, some basic Kiswahili was freely spoken by the money-changing agents near the customs offices, the cargo clearing and forwarding agents, the hawkers, and the public transport operators. According to several research participants like participant P7B, these groups of ordinary citizens meet and engage with many people who are travelling from Kenya and even Tanzania to Uganda for business and hence the need for them to impress their customers by speaking their language. The research participants in interviews and focus group discussions also reported that the middle-aged Ugandan citizens who visit the Kenyan markets to sell and buy goods also speak "some" Kiswahili when interacting with Kenyan customers and fellow businessmen.

32 When I asked the middle-aged participants which kind of Kiswahili they speak with the youth and the elderly citizens at Busia town, the participants reported that they speak "*Kiswahili sanifu*" (standard Kiswahili) with the youth, but tried to simplify their Kiswahili when interacting with older participants. According to them, "simplifying" means using "*Kiswahili cha kawaida*" (common Kiswahili). However, some middle-aged participants reported being able to speak *Sheng* with the youth in particular instances. This was particularly for the business people who claimed that since some of their customers are youth, they are obliged to speak the basic *Sheng* they knew so as "*kuwafurahisha*" (to please them). In line with this argument, a manager of one of the joints where numerous youths watch football matches noted:

> *Usipoongea Sheng kiasi wanaona ni kama uko mbali sana nao. So lazima unapambana na ile Sheng unajua. Si hata sisi tunajua Sheng? Ingawa si ile deep sana but atleast tunaweza ongea kitu...*
> If you don't speak Sheng they think that you are keeping a big distance away from them. So you must struggle with the Sheng you know. Don't we also know Sheng? Although not that deep one but atleast we are able to speak something...

33 Other participants also added that even middle-aged religious leaders in churches speak some *Sheng* when interacting with the youthful members of their churches. The participants claimed further that the middle-aged religious leaders do not only speak in *Sheng*, but also preach in *Sheng* during church services, meetings and seminars that are meant for the youth.

Linguistic Practices of the Elderly Citizens

34 I considered the elderly participants as persons above 60 years of age. While I interviewed only two of such participants who in turn reported on their language practices and those of their peers, most of the information regarding their linguistic behaviour was given by the rest of the groups. I also collected more information about this group from the observations.

35 Participants in the study reported that the citizens aged 60 years and above at the Busia border town speak Kiswahili on fewer occasions than the youth and middle aged. This,

according to the participants is because the elderly spent more time with other elderly people who share the same vernaculars. Participants claimed that as the two dominant groups at Busia, the Luo elders spent much time with their Luo kinsmen while the Luhya spent time with their fellow Luhya. Moreover, participants claimed that nearly all the Luo and Luhya elderly persons at Busia are able to speak each other's vernacular and therefore find it easy to interact across the two language groups. This means that the extent of their use of Kiswahili amongst themselves is limited.

36 My observation across the domains of the study confirmed the claims above. For instance, at most of the markets, the elderly women and men often occupied a common position often at the rear part, and specialized in items of local consumption such as grains and fresh farm produce. Passing there, one would overhear them speaking loudly in their vernaculars.

37 Commenting on this observation, P2B noted as follows:

> *Kama kawaida unapata kwa soko kuna watu wengi. Makabila ni tofauti na pia age ni tofautitofauti. Watu wanazungumza lugha tafautitofauti. Sasa kama wamama wazee nao ni mother tongue tu. Hao wanatoka tu hapa karibu. Hawatoki mbali. Na pia watu wanauzia ni wa hapa karibu tu. Kiswahili labda wewe ukimwongelesha ndio sasa atakujibu but wao wenyewe ni mother tongues.*
> Usually, you find that there are many people at the market. The tribes are different and also their age varies. People speak different languages. Now, for example, the old women only speak mother tongues. [Because] they just hail from around this place. They do not come from far. And also the people whom they sell to come from near here. So may be when you speak to them in Kiswahili is they will answer in Kiswahili but they only speak mother tongues amongst themselves.

38 The views of P2B in the extract above confirms the observation that I have stated preceding this extract about the elderly at the markets favoring vernacular language to Kiswahili, and goes ahead to argue that this is so because those elderly citizens and their potential customers are locals who speak the local indigenous languages. However, the extract also reveals that these elderly women at the markets can speak Kiswahili, but only when the person they are interacting with prompts them to do so.

39 In markets such as Sofia and Soko Poster, the elderly sellers position themselves at the back side of the market. They speak in their vernacular amongst them, and only turn to Kiswahili in case they notice a customer who seems not to understand Kiswahili. Participants in both FGDs 1, 2 and 3 concurred that the elders have a way of assessing an individual based on such things as their mode of dressing to tell whether the person was a stranger or not, and therefore, determine their language of choice on that basis. For the stranger, they would pick on Kiswahili and vice versa.

40 Participants also argued that most elders at Busia do not attend the modern churches where the language of sermons and prayer is their Kiswahili or English or both. They instead prefer the traditional churches which use local languages as the primary languages for most of their activities. In my observation, I noticed that majority of these churches are located several metres away from the border point and town centre. Such locations allow only local populations to attend the churches, leaving the other churches in town to the middle-aged, the youth and the children. On several occasions, I observed many of the participants in these categories streaming from the outskirts of the town towards the town centre to attend church services where English and Kiswahili are used.

41 Regarding the form of the Kiswahili they speak, participants observed that the elders speak "simple" Kiswahili and do not necessarily pay attention to the grammatical rules of standard Kiswahili. Their pronunciation depicts substantial vernacular influence, some of their vocabularies are also drawn from their local vernaculars, and the subject verb agreement is conspicuously absent. Thus, speaking standard Kiswahili is not something that they really pay attention to. In some of my interactions with the elders at Soko Posta for instance, I heard constructions like the following:

Tunauzanga (We sell / we normally sell)
Sipendangi (I don't like / I normally don't like)

42 The two examples above demonstrate mother tongue interference in the Kiswahili speeches of the elderly. Normally, the syntactical constructions for Kiswahili allow the verbs *uza* (buy) and *penda* (like) to take a free morpheme {*huwa*} to express the habitual form of the verb. This means that the habitual aspect of the two constructions should have been {*huwa tunauza*} and {*huwa sipendi*}, respectively. However, the way the two sentences were constructed is that the free morpheme for the habitual aspect is dropped, instead, suffixes {*-nga*} and {*-ngi*}, respectively, have been added to perform a similar function. Although I also observed such constructions in the speeches of the youthful participants, they were minimal, and barely minimal in the speeches of the middle-aged participants.

43 Having described the various patterns and forms of Kiswahili that emerged from my data, I now turn my attention to a discussion of what these means in the context of the study.

Key Sociolinguistic Issues in the Age-specific Use of Kiswahili at Busia

44 The findings that I have presented in the foregoing section indeed confirm the argument of the variationist sociolinguists that age is a core social variable in the use of any language in any society, Kiswahili at Busia border town included. The youth, the adults, and the elderly ordinary citizens at the Busia border town register salient differences in their patterns, the extent, and the forms of the use of Kiswahili. From the patterns and forms of Kiswahili identified in the data and presented in this paper, I have alluded to several sociolinguistic issues which warrant more elaboration, and which I now turn to in the next few paragraphs.

45 One of the issues that have come out evidently is that of identity. Language and identity are closely linked and inseparable, and language choice in a given moment within an interaction serve to mark particular identities (Omoniyi 2009), and shape other people's views of who we are (Peccei 1999). This argument is supported by Cameron (2001: 161), as cited in Kabugo (2013: 22), who argues that "language-use is among the social practices through which people assert their identities and distinguish themselves from others." Thus, in their quest to position themselves variously in their social interactions with others, the ordinary citizens at Busia find language a useful resource and as it appears, they reflect awareness of how Kiswahili is understood in different spaces and contexts. For instance, in their quest for a "progressive" and "fashionable" urban identity, the Kenyan youths at Busia pick on the *Sheng* variety of Kiswahili to communicate with their peers who would otherwise see them as "backward" were they

to express themselves in a "standard" variety of Kiswahili as they know it. In such instances, *Sheng* becomes a defining symbol of "youthfulness." It is this latter form of Kiswahili that the youth switch to when they are addressing the older members of the community, again portraying themselves as "well behaved." By switching between language forms, the citizens are positioning and constructing themselves as well as their co-present addressees. On their part, the middle-aged participants striving to use standard Kiswahili is to portray their identity as grown-ups, while the elders reaffirm their identity as the custodians of their culture and vernaculars as an important aspect of that culture.

46 The second salient issue arising from the results of this study and which also relates to the issue of identity as discussed in the previous paragraph is group membership. Research has shown that speakers will vary their use of language in order to accommodate or be accommodated in a given group, or more still, if they desire to exclude others. Commenting on the relationship between group membership and the use of language, Abdullah, Safrudin, Taib, and Ismail (2018: 775) note that "it is viewed that when people belong to the same age group, they often speak similarly. [But] as there are many different age groups in a community, an individual may use different linguistic features with a range of other speakers." In this case, the act of the middle-aged speaking slang-like and other forms of substandard Kiswahili with the youth is interpreted as an act of endearing themselves to their younger members of the society for certain ends. On the other hand, the fact that young adults have to change their way of speaking Kiswahili to a more "standard" form of Kiswahili when interacting with the adults reflects the desire to be accepted into the "mainstream" society that uses acceptable language.

47 Thirdly, the need to demonstrate linguistic power is at the core of variation in the use of Kiswahili at Busia. As Bourdieu (1977) has argued, certain languages, language varieties, and different ways of speaking in a linguistic market[3] carry more symbolic power than others. In some spaces at the Busia town, some ordinary people view Kiswahili as a more powerful code than the others spoken there. In some instances, particularly on the Ugandan side of the Busia town, Kiswahili is associated with economic power. While this might be primarily due to its long-standing history of association with trading activities in the East African region, it is possible that the speakers of Kiswahili who cross the border from the Ugandan side create the impression that they have more money than their counterparts on the Ugandan side of the town. I am basing this argument on the remarks of one of the members of the focus group involving Kenyan participants that "*wanasemanga pesa zetu ziko na mimba*" (they [Ugandans] say that our money is pregnant).

48 Last but not least, the age-based patterns of the use of Kiswahili among the ordinary citizens at Busia border town points to the notion of perception and attitudes towards Kiswahili by its speakers. Sociolinguistic researchers consider the perceptions and attitudes that people have about their languages and those of others significant in shaping the language-based decisions of the people; which language to use, how to use it, in which form to use it, with whom to use it, when to use it, where to use it, and so on (Davies 1995; Fasold 1979; Ferguson 1996; Holmes 2013; Meyerhoff, 2006; Silverstein, 1979). The general observation of the researchers is that not all the linguistic varieties in any community are equally valued, and that while some varieties are judged favorable by the speakers, others are not (Meyerhoff 2006). Yet, in her study, Bayiga

(2016: 247) found that "the way participants attach value to certain languages makes them react towards the languages differently either by (i) denying that they know certain languages, (ii) choosing not to learn certain languages, (iii) deciding not to include certain languages they know in their active language practices, and (iv) using their valued language more than the others and in most domains." We can therefore argue, for instance, that the youthful citizens at Busia border town use the slang-like and substandard Kiswahili more than the other varieties because they value it more.

49 Related to the above, the notion of Kiswahili as a backward language prevalent among the Kenyan youths is also raised in the study. This category of the study participants associate "backwardness" with village life, implying that Kiswahili is perceived as a language for the rural folks. Thus, speaking Kiswahili in urban settings is considered ridiculous for the youths. This revelation shows that "standard" Kiswahili is a low prestige language among this group. The fact that these youths craft their own variety of Kiswahili—Sheng—by bringing into their form alien linguistic structures can be regarded as a way of modifying their language in order to attain a covertly prestigious variety that can serve as their identity as "progressive" citizens.

50 The middle-aged preference for code-mixing between English and Kiswahili could, on the flipside, indicate their preference for both. However, this can also be explained in terms of codemixing being a common linguistic behaviour that allows bilinguals to communicate freely with other bilinguals (Bayiga 2016; Myers-Scotton 1992). Because English is the official language of Kenya, it is possibly easy for the middle-aged who use it in their day-to-day official duties to carry it in their informal social activities in multilingual urban contexts where Kiswahili as the national language is considered more appropriate. But again, analysis of the data revealed that the codemixing is basically of the lexical items that refer to objects of foreign origin which ether do not have their equivalent in Kiswahili, or the available lexical equivalents in Kiswahili are not common to the ordinary people.

51 The finding that elderly citizens tend to value their vernaculars more than Kiswahili can be attributed to the issue raised by the variationist sociolinguists, that, as people grow older, they become naturally inclined towards non-standard varieties. Chambers (1995) in particular argues that this is due to the reason that the older people are no longer in active formal employment where standard varieties are used. This happens to be the case with the elderly people at Busia who, perhaps after retiring from formal employment, their circle of friends and social networks have narrowed to their kinsmen and close family and personal friends.

Conclusion

52 The revelations of this study, that is, that the youthful citizens at Busia town use slang-like Kiswahili, the adult citizens engage in extensive Kiswahili-English code-mixing, and the elderly citizens prefer their vernaculars to Kiswahili, are not necessarily new findings. The findings largely conform to and confirm the theoretical generalizations that are already available in literature about how members of these age brackets socially use language. The general observation and conclusion to be made from this is that the increase in age correlates well with increasing conservatism in speech.

53 However, of great significance for my study about the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice in East Africa, the findings reveal that Kiswahili is after all not a homogeneous

variety as the purely "theoretical linguists" have portrayed it. As a lived practice, the use of Kiswahili at Busia varies considerably based on the age of the speaker and other variables. This, as the discussion section has revealed, is motivated by factors such as identity construction, signifying the intention to belong to groups, expression of power, and citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards Kiswahili.

54 It would therefore be important that other researchers interested in the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice try and illuminate on other social variable such as level of education, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and so forth in order to come up with more evidence-based generalizations about the use of Kiswahili in East Africa. From a simple literature search, one would realize and agree that many of such studies have been conducted in other languages, particularly the European languages, with only a few of such studies in the African languages like Kiswahili.

55 Following Fischer's (1958: 55) argument that "in analyzing socio-symbolic variants there will obviously be a certain amount of association between variant series," the studies I have recommended above should also endeavour to try and establish the association between these variables and others in order to see how the variables influence and complete each other. This will help us for instance to answer questions such as: How is the use of Kiswahili among the female youth similar or different from that of the male youth? Is the use of Kiswahili among older men different from that of the older women? How is the Kiswahili of working class citizens different from that of the middle class or the elite? The standpoint of this paper is that ethnographically oriented research can provide sufficient answers to such questions.

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NOTES

1. According to Rymes & Leone (2014), the Citizen Sociolinguistics model traces the ways citizens understand the world of languages around them and how they apply these languages in their day-to-day social interactions. Generally, the citizen

sociolinguistics model pays attention to how ordinary citizens and their linguistic resources circulate back and forth in social discourses and position themselves in social networks, and the social-indexical value attached to the respective linguistic resources in different contexts.

2. In the analysis, the interviewees have been assigned codes as P1B (Participant 1 Busia), P2B (Participant 2 Busia)... up to P16B (Participant 16 Busia). The focus group discussions have been assigned labels as FGD1, FGD2, and FGD3. The participants in the groups were mainly youthful male and female aged between 20 and 35 years.

3. Bourdieu (1977) coined and used the term "linguistic market" to symbolically refer to an arena or social instances where linguistic exchanges take place.

ABSTRACTS

This paper deals with *age* as a linguistic variable in the use of Kiswahili among ordinary citizens in Busia town at the Kenya-Uganda border. I chose age over other possible factors because it emerged as a salient ground for variation in the use of Kiswahili among ordinary citizens in my PhD research on language as a lived practice. Thus, the paper is intended to demonstrate how the ordinary citizens in Busia use Kiswahili across three different age categories: the youth, the adults, and the elderly, and what this variation reveals about how Kiswahili is socially construed and constructed by its speakers. Specifically, three objectives are embedded in the discussions of the paper, 1) to ascertain the age-related patterns of the use of Kiswahili in Busia town, 2) to explore the salient age-related linguistic forms of Kiswahili used by each age category, and 3) to provide a sociolinguistic account for the patterns and forms that emerge. The findings reveal several complex age-based patterns of the use of Kiswahili, but generally show that the youth prefer slang-like and other "sub-standard" forms of Kiswahili, the adults employ some standard forms of Kiswahili but with extensive code-mixing between Kiswahili and English, and the elderly prefer their vernaculars to Kiswahili, which (vernaculars) influence the forms of Kiswahili that they sporadically speak. The paper concludes that Kiswahili, just like any other language, is dynamic and prone to variations based on various contextual and social factors. With this conclusion, the paper recommends further extensive studies that can shade more light on other linguistic variables such as level of education and gender, and how these complement the age variable in the use of Kiswahili within the context of this study.

INDEX

Geographical index: Kenya, Uganda | Ouganda
Keywords: language variation, linguistic variable, age, Kiswahili, identity, power, solidarity, perception and attitude

AUTHOR

PATRICK LUGWIRI OKOMBO

Department of Linguistics, Makerere University.